

RESEARCH NOTE

Ways of being

Ideas of maleness and femaleness in a Port Moresby Settlement

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Abstract

This article presents the concepts of gender and violence in the context of an urban settlement in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. I discuss how the ideas of maleness and femaleness engage with the notions of sociality and violence. I use every day talk to describe the ways in which the settlement dwellers described their ways of being male and female. I outline some of these characteristics and then discuss how changing forms of gender interacts with violence and how understandings of violence may differ from the human rights espoused by non-government organisations. By drawing upon ethnographic examples, this article highlight the violence based on the notion of relationality.

Keywords

gender violence, sociality, urban settlement, Papua New Guinea

The old and the new: all mixed up as one

In the fast changing modern city of Port Moresby, the ways of thinking about gender are both continually reinforced and reconfigured. These changing forms of gender relations guide the ideas about maleness, femaleness, and the ways of being. Older forms of division of labour and the ideas of maleness and femaleness ensure that in a contemporary context, women and girls are expected to be able to perform domestic duties such as cooking and

cleaning while men and boys are encouraged to be protectors and providers for the family. These gender-defined ways of being were a constant and familiar feature of daily life throughout my stay in an urban settlement at Nine Mile, Port Moresby.

A mundane example of these changes to contemporary social action and gender thinking is evident in the fact that the man is not always the breadwinner of the family. Therefore, ‘bread-winning women’, or known as the main ‘provider’ are considered as strong women. For instance, a friend of mine who supported her family financially while her husband was unemployed would often say to me: ‘I don’t get paid much working as a *haus meri* (domestic house cleaner) but it’s for the kids, as long as I get a little money to buy their tinned fish and rice’. Another friend, Karen, whose husband was also unemployed, had a different view of her current situation:

‘I married John in the year 2000 and for six years he didn’t have a job, I should have dumped him and married someone else like my sisters in the street are doing, but I am a strong woman and I am still with him’.

This shows mixing of two different ways—old and new—of being a ‘strong’ woman. The new figure of woman as the ‘provider’ is in some way emulating the male role, but can also be seen as emulating the old female figure where the woman along with the man is expected to be a provider. It is the man’s diminished role that is important—women were also providers, but in such examples, the relational balance has changed.

In addition to the changing roles of women, new ideas of being a man complement and challenge the old ideas of maleness. NGO campaigns advocating for the eradication of violence against women portray the non-violent unaggressive man as the ideal type. Priests and pastors who urge their congregations to adhere to Christian principles of love and respect also espouse similar notions and ideals from the pulpit. Men in the settlement are in a paradoxical situation where new ways of gaining respect and maybe even being seen as a

leader as well challenges the normative assumption of the Melanesian man. These new ideas of maleness are often in conflict with older or traditional concepts of gender relations, thus conflicts arise when people come to take on new roles or find their actions played out in new relations.

Violence and changing relations

These new ways of thinking about roles and responsibilities of men and women therefore arise in the context of new forms of social action and consequently have different effects on the relations between men and women, with violence often being one of the avenues through which these changes are being enacted and negotiated. Gender violence, changing gender roles, modernity, and male domination in Papua New Guinea have been rigorously analysed (MacIntyre 2000; Spark 2010; Strathern 1988; Toft 1985). Much of the discourse about gender violence points to theories of male domination, modernity and power relations. In an effort to provide an alternate explanation, I contend that there is a need to consider the relational aspect of persons affected and affecting violence. In this article, I shall focus only on the violence between husbands and wives as a unit of analysis.

How can we analytically account for domestic violence in contemporary Port Moresby? If gender is relationally derived, in which social attributes gain definition from one's own actions and equally the actions of others, then I propose that some acts of violence occur when one party perceives that the other is acting in a way that redefines the relations and their own part in it. For a woman to be a wife, it is required that a man acts as a husband: in these conceptualisations, social identities or attributes are relationally and mutually constituted, as much an artefact of one's own actions as they are the result of others. The fights between couples can occur because one or both parties act in a relationally inappropriate manner and this in turn characterises their performance of gender. For example, a married man who continually spends large amounts of money on a woman who is not his wife or immediate kin is bound to arouse suspicion. When I asked why men

and women fight, my friend Karen shrugged her shoulders and said: *'Mekim lo action tasol, na em bai save-hard lo toktok ya'* (Show it by action, it's hard to talk):

I don't like to talk or argue as I will get beaten up; instead I show my frustration or my unhappiness with my [husband's] behaviour by sitting on the road and playing cards. Then when he gets angry and tries to argue and fight with me, I tell him well you go and spend all your money drinking beer; when you should be buying food for the family, so why should I cook and clean? I will go and play cards on the street.

Karen's husband John, who is also my friend and an active NGO volunteer and community mobiliser, said:

It's hard, I know about human rights and woman's rights but I get really frustrated when I come home from work to find my wife out on the road gambling and the house is a mess. She expects me to do my part as the head of the family and I expect her to do her part too.

This story reflects the relational consequences of a person acting the way in which one is expected to act. Karen thinks that by spending his money on beer John does not act as a husband and a father should do, and that is the reason why she shows her disapproval by not carrying out her domestic duties or behaving like a 'proper' wife or mother. Marilyn Strathern surmises:

...if the wife is the agent, the one who acts, then her husband is the cause of her acting, though not himself active. It is simply in reference to him that the wife acts. (Strathern 1998: 272)

As above, I contend that persons are relationally constituted. Therefore, in some instances of violence between husbands and wives, the act of violence is directed to address, perhaps reciprocate the mutual consequences of action in a relation. Karen's defiance was intended as a protest at John's drinking and illustrates one of the ways women in the block

deal with husbands and with violence: some women choose to fight back; others choose to ‘mekim action’ by leaving their husbands or going to stay with relatives. Husbands such as John might either continue drinking or take a break from drinking to appease their wives. In many ways, this continuous exchange of action by a man and a woman is resonant with Bateson’s (1936) theory of schismogenesis outlined in *Naven*—whereby rivalry between parties elicits similar or symmetrical behaviour. In this case, the more a husband drinks, the more his wife defiantly gambles.

Another interesting example is the story of Wally, Watson and Rita. Wally, Watson and Rita were once entangled in a love triangle. Rita and Wally grew up together in the settlement, were in a relationship, and had a daughter together. Wally left the settlement for a long time leaving Rita and their daughter in Port Moresby. While Wally was away, Rita entered into a relationship with Watson and both started living together after getting married. Wally returned to the block in 2009, and Wally and Rita consequently resumed their relationship. In February 2010, a drunken Watson was “encouraged” by his friends to confront Wally and Rita. Watson had finished work and came to the settlement saying that he had come to cause trouble, so with “encouraging” words from some fellow drunkards, Watson set about looking for Wally and Rita. He eventually found Watson and Rita together and grazed Wally’s arm with a bush knife. Wally and Rita managed to escape. However, Wally with his grazed arm stood in a dark place and waited for Watson to walk by so he could retaliate. As Watson passed Wally, Wally raised the weapon he was holding and dealt Watson a deadly blow on the head, which subsequently killed him.

In offering an analysis of this story that focuses on a relational explanation of actions I take my point of reference from those whose intellectual enquiry into sex, violence and gender have been from the standpoint of understanding violence as an effect of social relations rather than an act of individual pathology (Harvey and Gow 1994) and more specifically to Melanesia, where Marilyn Strathern posits that Melanesian notions of gender are

inherently relational: that is they attend to actions-what a person, object or even sexual organ is doing-rather than the attributes or properties of biology and sex (Strathern 1998:128).

Various members of the community inferred that the infidelity of Wally and Rita caused Watson as a husband to act like this. Wally acted with Rita as he felt that it was rightful to resume his relationship with Rita as he has a child with her, therefore he viewed her as his wife. Although grounded on different bases both men considered themselves to be Rita's husband and refused to accept that the other man was the husband. Some of the members of the community that I spoke to after the event believed that Rita should be arrested and charged as an accessory to murder because one man was killed and another was arrested for murder due to her indecisiveness.

From one perspective, though, this seems to be shifting the blame to Rita for Wally's actions and Watson's bad fortune. However, from another perspective this can be explained through the situation of violence between couples. During my stay in the field, although I saw and heard of sporadic episodes of such violence between men and women-what was a stake was fights between persons as a husband and a wife. Interpretations relying on individual biological propensities of sexual attributes would miss these important points. As further evidence of these explanations, I also saw and heard couples getting into violent arguments and fights and yet the next day I saw the same couple walking to the bus stop together. Upon enquiry as to what actions were taken by the victim (usually the woman), I was often told that '*em fight blo wanpla dei*' (it is a fight for one day). Is it ignorance of the law, lack of resources to get out of marriages, or a fear that kept women in a state of apathy when it comes to dealing with issues of violence? It seems like that the '*fight blo wanpla dei*' have the same sorts of connotations such as that described by Karen in terms of 'showing by action'. I suggest that the conceptual logic of reciprocity or schismogenesis addresses the relational consequences of earlier actions with the object of restoring a relation aligned

with expectations.

In the settlement where I lived and worked in, various NGOs and INGOs have conducted awareness campaigns, trainings and workshops on gender violence, children rights and human rights funded by donors such as AusAID and the United Nations. There is also a continuous attempt to build awareness about violence against women in the local media. I found that people in the block have some knowledge of these issues and are aware that there are laws in place to protect women and children from violence. However, translating this knowledge into practice is not always so easy. I observed during the fieldwork that the ways in which people respond and react to violence is contradictory to the development oriented awareness campaigns espoused by donors, women's rights activists and NGOs. In considering these local realities, I suggest NGOs working to tackle the issue of gender violence to consider a strategy that moves away from the conventional gender empowerment and inequality rhetoric. It must focus on a campaign that emphasises the importance of relations between people to highlight cultural understandings of what it is to be a man or woman, male and female, husband or wife.

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